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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002552

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL IZ IR  
SUBJECT: MORE ON MUQTADA AL-SADR'S MUMAHIDOON

REF: A. BAGHDAD 2448 (JIHAD OF THOUGHTS)  
B. BAGHDAD 2488 (SADR'S STEAMROLLERS)  
C. 28 JULY 2008 BAGHDAD O/I (JAM FREEZE)

Classified By: Political MinCouns Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Senior Sadrists Trend officials are working overtime in media interviews to tout "al-Mumahidoon," the newly-established unarmed wing of Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mehdi (JAM) militia, as a "social, cultural, and religious" entity. The Mumahidoon will purportedly abandon armed struggle to perform such benign activities as operating "Baby Abdullah Schools" through the "High Cultural Corps." Their hated Shia ISCI/Badr rivals are not buying the hype, however, and claim instead that "al-Mumahidoon" is little more than a media ruse designed to buy time for the battered but not beaten JAM militia whose fighters are receiving military training in Iran. Indeed, Sadr has stated in no uncertain terms that he will retain an armed JAM element, and his spokesman has linked the size and operational scope of such an element to Coalition Force withdrawal. While it remains unclear whether "al-Mumahidoon" will prove to be anything more than a propaganda exercise, the Sadrists will very likely stake their short/medium-term viability on the time-tested, lowest-common-denominator message of opposition to the American "occupation." End Summary.

Media Offensive to Sell "al-Mumahidoon"

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¶2. (U) In an August 8 interview with the pan-Arab daily "al-Sharq al-Awsat," Sadrists Trend mouthpiece Salah al-Obaidi elaborated on the mission of Muqtada al-Sadr's "al-Mumahidoon," the purported newly-established unarmed wing of the Jaysh al-Mehdi (JAM) militia (Ref A and B). Obaidi identified key "Mumahidoon" tasks as establishing a literacy campaign, operating "Baby Abdullah Schools" for children, and supporting the families of dead and wounded JAM fighters (Note: 'Baby Abdullah' refers to the murdered infant son of Hussein, Shia icon and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. To give an idea of the viscerally emotive impact of the 'Baby Abdullah' imagery on the collective Shia psyche, a Shia-oriented website [www.al-mahdi.org/moharram/1426/alradee/alwatan.htm](http://www.al-mahdi.org/moharram/1426/alradee/alwatan.htm) shows a photo of a small Shia boy holding a self-flagellation whip while gazing at a drawing of the murdered Baby Abdullah, an arrow twice the length of the baby's body sticking out of Abdullah's throat. End Note). Obaidi said the "Baby Abdullah Schools" and other projects will be implemented in conjunction with over 120 cultural centers belonging to the Sadrists Trend, including the offices of the "Continuation of Allah Cultural Centers" and the "High Cultural Corps."

¶3. (C) Obaidi clarified that al-Mumahidoon is open to males only, and he claimed it would be funded in part by Najaf's supreme body of Shia clerics led by Grand Ayatollah Sistani, "because, in truth as never before, we asked the Marja'iyyah to support us financially." While Obaidi has been speaking on an almost daily basis to the Arab and Western media, he has not responded to our telephone calls since he spoke

directly to PolOff by telephone several weeks ago and assured us that Sadr's freeze on JAM offensive activities would be permanent (Ref C). Sadrists Trend CoR member Liqa al-Yasin sounded similar themes in a press interview, characterizing the creation of "al-Mumahidoon" as an effort to combat "secular Western ideas seeking to infiltrate Iraqi society," adding that "this type of jihad is the basis for building a society and rejecting the destructive ideas of occupation."

**¶4.** (U) Apart from explaining the various "thought jihad" activities of "al-Mumahidoon" (translated loosely as 'the Steamrollers'), Obaidi and other Sadrists Trend/JAM officials have talked about Sadr's stated intention to retain an armed resistance wing and its link to the presence of American troops in Iraq. On August 8, Obaidi characterized the new armed groups as "jihad companies against the occupation forces whose formation has not been completed yet, as we are waiting for the results of the negotiations between Iraq and America." Yasin unleashed withering criticism at "Iraqi parties for turning against the national project they supported during their election campaigns before reaching parliament, extending bridges to the occupiers, and seeing the presence of foreign forces in their lands and governorates as a blessing." Yasin denounced efforts to address the presence of American troops, whether through "a long-term framework agreement or in the form of a security protocol or memorandum of understanding," as "attempts to pull the wool over our eyes."

**¶5.** (U) The Sadrists also are trying to leave the door open to armed groups. On August 10, "al-Sharq al-Awsat" quoted JAM leader Hussein al-Taie as saying "resistance is a legitimate

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right for all people in an occupied country, and Islamic law compels us to jihad," although in the same article an anonymous source within the movement said "until now there is no clear decision from the (Americans) and no clear decision from our side," while Obaidi said the issue of the new armed wing is "delicate and bound with secrecy." In an August 12 interview with "al-Hayat," Obaidi referred to the armed wing as "special cells selected by Muqtada himself" and again linked their continuation to the presence of American troops in the country. Contrary to private statements of several senior Sadrists, in the August 12 interview Obaidi emphasized that "Sadr is not indicating a dissolution of Jaysh al-Mahdi." Sadrist CoR member Ahmed Masousi denied any Iranian role in the creation of the new unarmed and armed JAM groups, saying "Jaysh al-Mahdi depends on its own capabilities and is not linked to any regional power, but rather develops itself by itself."

ISCI Reaction: Don't Go For the Head Fake

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**¶6.** (C) Much of Baghdad's chattering class has escaped Iraq's sweltering August heat for cooler climes (Iran, Switzerland, Turkey, France, and the UK are among the destinations of Embassy contacts, whose vacation plans include shopping for the latest fall fashions) and thus are unavailable for comment on "al-Mumahidoon." However, senior officials of ISCI/Badr, Sadr's main Shia rivals, expressed pronounced skepticism about "al-Mumahidoon." Dismissing the creation of a new unarmed JAM wing as nothing more than a "media trick," ISCI Chairman Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's top advisor Haitham al-Husseini claimed that the Sadrists are touting a fictitious "al-Mumahidoon" while preparing the organization for future armed struggle by sending JAM fighters to Iran for military training. He asserted that "fighting is the only game the Sadrists know how to play," and maintained that the purported "al-Mumahidoon" creation is part of Sadr's larger strategy to buy time for his fighters to re-arm, re-train, and re-deploy after JAM absorbed some punishing - but by no means decisive - setbacks at the hands of the ISF and Coalition Forces in Basrah, Sadr City, and Amarah. Haitham confided that neither the ailing Abdul Aziz nor acting ISCI

Chair Amar al-Hakim have had direct contact with Muqtada or other top Trend leaders since May when they discussed the Tehran-brokered "16 Point Agreement" that permitted unopposed ISF entry into Sadr City. He also confessed that ISCI/Badr feels considerable frustration that "some people" in the Iranian government continue to aid the Sadrist.

¶17. (S) GOI Finance Minister and senior ISCI official Bayan Jabr told the Ambassador that Iran would push to see the Jaysh al-Mehdi dissolved given the damage it has done to Iran's image. However, Jabr noted, Iran would continue to build up the capabilities of Special Groups to attack Coalition Forces and GOI targets. Badr strongman Hadi al-Amri professed a bit more optimism, claiming to poloffs August 11 that the Sadrist are moving in a good direction thanks to Iranian pressure brought about by badgering from ISCI/Badr and Prime Minister Maliki. Hadi scoffed at Sadr's stated claim of resistance by noting JAM's definition of "resistance" is more about waging war on fellow Shia than attacking foreign troops.

Comment

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¶18. (C) Looking beyond the Sadr media spin, there is something absurd about the notion of semi-literate JAM fighters putting down their rifles and rocket launchers to operate "Baby Abdullah Schools" through the auspices of the "High Cultural Corps." It remains unclear whether "al-Mumahidoon" will indeed evolve into a "social, cultural, and religious entity." We are likely to hear more from Muqtada about the armed "resistance" cell, perhaps in connection with the scheduled August 16 expiration and possible extension of Sadr's JAM "freeze" order. Meanwhile, Sadr leaders are dealing with the lack of clear guidance from their leader by issuing public statements centered around the Trend's time-tested, lowest common-denominator messages: opposition to the American "occupation" and a corresponding demand for a withdrawal timetable. End Comment.

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